

New Words That Ring False

By MARTHA McCULLOCH-WILLIAMS.

IT is unlucky to have so fine a feeling for words that the mishandling or miscoining thereof sets your temper's teeth on edge. I am no purist—merely a plain blunt person, loving English undefiled, hence ready and willing to raise my voice in protest against defilements. Many of them are so puzzling, not to say recondite, it would require a bureau of scientific word research to discover their reason for being.

Is it a microbe or simply a brain maggot that afflicts us with *motivate*?—the which, it is a safe bet, you will find in more than half the current screeds dealing with books or plays or even short stories. Indeed the wordling is fairly epidemic. Whosoever started it deserves ill of the reading public.

You gather from the context that it is an idiotic corruption of the noun *motive*—its original coiner doubtless felt that he was putting a new and artless frill upon expression. But making nouns over into verbs, or even participles, is chancy business. *Motived*, once seen, was bad enough. But *motivate*—ugh!

Then there is *intrigued*—another good noun gone wrong. I know the word is also an active verb with a descriptive tang; but why, in the name of the prophet, wrest it violently from its proper sense either as noun or verb to give it a silly significance wholly foreign to its rightful one? I wonder what Great Personage saw it first, and by force of example made

it the fashion. Story folk are most plentifully *intrigued*—now by a smile, now by a sunset, again by a hint of scandal or a presage of calamity. To date, though, I have crossed nobody in bookland *intrigued* by the shop worn wiles of the German spy.

The usage is possibly a transplantation from the Gallic—then all the more out of place in our own tongue! I am not inhospitable to new words for which there is room and need. But verbal crazy quilts offend my ear.

A man who knew better, the late E. C. Stedman, tried out even a worse coinage than *motivate*, in writing of Cuba during one of her periodic revolutions as "Our virginized sister," which appears to be sent above even poetic license. *Virginize* must mean, if anything, to make virgin. How the miracle could be wrought was beyond my poor comprehension—yet when I asked for light on the point the answer was a shrug and: "I wrote the verses so long ago I had forgotten doing them."

The sex implication is "Gey ill to deal wi'"—witness this quotation from a Boston bred authoress, regarding feminine athletics: "What would our great grandmothers say if they saw the race of New Women they had begotten?" (Italics mine.)

There should be a verbal barrier for schooling sporting writers. It might possibly teach them several things—as that there are at least nine ways of stating things horsey instead of the two or three they so sadly overwork. Also and further, that after a colt is in the stud book, duly and authoritatively christened, courtesy and grammar equally demand that the animal, once its name has been mentioned, is properly entitled to *who*, not *which*. To say: "Man o' War which &c.," is about equal to saying "King George, which spoke," or: "Gen. Pershing, which led the parade." When I see it in print throughout the season memory harks back to a truly rural region whose inhabitants invariably answer "Which" to any personal interrogation. Whether they know not *who* and *what* or regard them as too fine for use, I cannot take it upon me to say. "The colt which won" is a perfectly good locution, but spare us such things as: "Exterminator, which beat Billy Kelly."

Remember, a named racer is personified, hence entitled to *who*, the same as a king or a general.

There are three ways of setting forth a racer's breeding—two right, one clumsily wrong. Just now the wrong way is all the fashion. Witness this, which may be duplicated in any sporting column: "Mudlark, by Skylark and Mud Hen"—which should read either Mudlark by Skylark out of Mud Hen, or preferably Mudlark the Skylark-Mud Hen colt. The last is briefer, therefore better. Few words and much telling is a golden rule—if you are not out to kill space!

But why gird at the sport writers when here is Yale's professor of English literature letting himself speak of critics as "hunting in couples." If he will borrow the language of the hunting field, he should not mishandle it—should know that *couple* in this phrase never takes a plural. It is properly a kennel phrase. Hounds are trained to hunt in *couple* so that when the leader nips the quarry—wolf, bear, boar or bull—his *couple* mate will be at his shoulder, eagerly ready for a stronger, deadlier hold. The light *couple* chains run from one collar to another. Fox hounds rarely run in actual *couple*, though trained to do it, partly to keep young dogs from "running riot," that is to say going off on hare scent from the true trail. But packs are reckoned in *couple*—one, two, ten or twenty, with never an *s*. Used in this sense, *couple* ranks with deer, sheep, swine or kine.

I dare not even glance across the morasses of dialect—such jack o' lanterns dance through a many pages. Some good day, space and strength permitting, I may say a few things about that uneasy subject, and its circumscribing complement, local color. But they do not belong here.

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